

Falling, Over and Over

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Falling, Over and Over

by [TigerPrawn](#)

Summary

Jack never made it to Paris, fate had other plans for him.

Notes

A new instalment in the Tagged For Time Travel Series, for RareMeat's Cliff Appreciation Week.

Can be read as a standalone fic, but would likely make more sense if you at least read the first fic in the series - A Sense of Self (it's only around 1500 words).

Re: SPOILERS for DS! I actually wrote this before DS came out and based it on my impressions/interpretations from the trailers, etc. However, I have since watched the cut scenes and amended this fic slightly to include more in-game references/terminology. That said! Cliff has amnesia. He gets his memory back at the very end, but even then is quite vague about the game content. The references to his past are very vague and mostly I have not edited, so are pretty much gleaned from the trailers. There are NO SPOILERS for the ending of Death Stranding, but if you have played/watched it, then you'll get some of the more vague references.

Also, the use of the term "strand" in here is different from the game, partly because of the amnesia. Even so it describes something similar in the game in regards to connections between the living and the dead.

Chapter 1

Falling Over

He woke suddenly, gasping for breath in a dark room. He expected to be cold but didn't know why he thought he would be, nor why he wasn't. The temperature was moderate and it took him a moment to realise that he lay on a small bunk rather than the hard, rocky floor he could see in his mind.

His stomach heaved and he felt like he was falling.

He blinked a few times, trying to orientate himself, knowing he should - a soldier's instinct. Though he had no memory of being a soldier. No memory of anything beyond this dark room. He stilled himself, calmed his breathing and lay there, letting his eyes adjust to the dark.

Slowly the room around him began to take shape. It was small, the bunk was at one end, under a curtained window. There was a desk and chair, a wardrobe. It reminded him of being a student in dorms. But as soon as he tried to take hold of that memory it was gone again.

When he tried to reach up to open the curtain and see what was outside, his stomach roiled. His mind filled with black and the stench of death, leaving him wondering how he would recognise such a scent. He let his hand drop, not wanting to see what was out there, real or imagined.

He levelled his breathing once more, with techniques he couldn't recall learning, and then carefully sat. It wasn't until he was completely upright that his stomach lurched and he fell forward from the bed. His fingers clawing at the linoleum floor as he heaved.

His stomach felt empty so he hadn't expected anything to come up. But he was wrong. A thick, black and viscous liquid poured from his mouth, and he wasn't sure whether it was coming from his stomach, lungs or both.

And then the room was suddenly bright, so bright that his head felt like it was going to split apart.

"It's okay, we've got you." Two pairs of hands pulled him up gently and then moved him back to the bed. He collapsed onto it, unable to find the strength to pull away or run, which every instinct was telling him to.

"He did it again," One of the voices - female - said quietly, a gentle hand resting against his forehead for a moment and then away.

"Ugh, gross. I didn't believe Sam when he said that was what the guy was puking when they brought him in, that's fucked up, what the hell is he on?" This one sounded like a young man, but he was unable to focus, the light making his head swim.

"Shh," The woman scalded, "Stop swearing around the residents. Go call an orderly to clear the mess."

There were footsteps and then the light dimmed a little, the room still illuminated but not blinding.

"Where," He started to croak the words but could only get the first one out, and barely that. Barely distinguishable as human.

"You're at the St Mary's Rehabilitation Centre, we'll get you back on your feet, okay. Just let us help you."

Despite the kind words, he was wary. He had no reason to be so, it just seemed to be an automatic response, something ingrained and instinctual within him. He did his best to nod either way as he focused in on her face and she smiled down at him.

"We'll get you cleaned up and the doctor will be around in a few hours. Try to rest." She finished tucking him in as though he was a small child, then patted his arm and left the room.

*

Jack Ganzer felt like shit.

He wondered if it was food poisoning. He felt like he'd been drinking heavily the entire night and now was sick and tired. But he hadn't had anything. He'd come straight home and ended up getting an early night as he was so tired.

Then he'd been woken up in the night by a commotion outside in the back alley behind his apartment. When he'd pulled himself from the bed to see what was going on, his stomach had lurched and he'd started throwing up. He must have brought up his entire lunch and dinner before passing out with exhaustion. The noise outside was joined by vehicles and then it was gone, all of it an irritating buzz in his stomach and head.

Jack had managed to pull himself back into bed and eventually fallen into a fitful sleep, plagued with nightmares of falling, over and over, from a clifftop.

It wasn't until he woke up that he realised someone else had been falling with him too. Not a person, just person shaped, viscous and black.

He didn't feel sick anymore, and being tired wasn't a good enough reason to call in. He didn't mind working at the rehab clinic, but more than that, he didn't want his parole officer coming down on him over missed days.

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There was a cliff. There was a beach.

He wasn't sure if it was a real place or somewhere imagined, but his dream had taken him there. He stood on the edge of it and then fell.

No, he didn't fall. There was another person there. He was pulled, pulled over the cliff and now he was falling towards the ocean in a firm embrace.

No, not pulled. He went willingly. He surrendered himself to the moment.

He woke as his body hit the hard, cold sea of blackness, bile rising in him.

He managed to hold it within him, but he could feel the slime that resided within his body, trying to find release from the confines of his flesh.

The sun was up now, coming through the split in the curtains, lighting a strip down the wall, as though slicing the darkness in half. He wondered whether the light of day would change anything for him.

In an attempt to find out, he slowly sat on the bed and let his feet find the floor. His stomach swirled for a moment, but didn't lurch as it had before. An improvement at least, even if he could feel the viscous black under his skin, inside his organs and sliding along his bones.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there but the light seemed much brighter when the door opened and someone came in. A woman in a casual uniform - smart trousers and a t-shirt with a logo.

"How are you feeling?" She asked with polite concern, and he recognised her voice as the woman who had seen to him in the night.

He gave a slight nod, "Better."

She smiled at that and nodded back. She carried a small medical tray and set it down on the bedside table.

"That's good. We get a lot of withdrawal cases, everyone reacts differently. The main thing is to get you feeling better." Her tone was kind, and in the absence of knowing how to respond to that, he merely nodded again.

She pulled the curtains back, letting in the full light. The room was bright. Painted off white with a white trim, so different from how black it had seemed in the darkness.

"They'll be bringing breakfast along shortly. I expect you'll get Jack," She let out a soft sigh and he tried to understand her meaning, but then she elaborated. "He's... a little bit of a brat, but not a bad kid. If he irritates you, do tell him to shut up. Many do." She smiled, and he nodded again.

She handed him a cup of water from the tray and a small disposable cup with pills in it.

"These will help you feel better. Settle your stomach," She told him. He nodded again, taking the pills and water from her and taking both into his mouth. He found it an instinct to move the pills to the side of his mouth, swallowing the water and keeping the drugs from going down.

The woman didn't seem to notice or doubt him, as she held out her hand and took the empty items back.

She looked as though she were ready to turn and leave, but instead stopped and looked at him softly.

"My name is Amanda, what's yours?"

He blinked.

It hadn't occurred to him that the people keeping him in this place wouldn't know such a simple thing as his name.

Something that when he searched his mind, he couldn't find either. Instead only the memory of the dream returned. In a man's arms on the top of a cliff. Going over, falling. Hitting the water. Looking back up at...

The memory shook him back to the present and he puffed out a breath.

"Cliff," He finally replied in a croaky voice. "My name is Cliff."

She smiled, "Nice to meet you Cliff."

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"Did you hear what happened? Sam said it was the same as when he puked in the night. Honestly I have no idea what that guy has been taking, but no one here has seen anything like it."

Jack heard Janice speaking with someone in the kitchen, walking in to see it was Fred. More day staff, permanent not volunteers like him, collecting the breakfast trays for their assigned residents.

"What now?" Jack asked, curious given his own sickness during the night. Maybe it was something going around? And if not, at the least, it might make for some entertainment.

It was one of the few weirdly enjoyable things about this place - the interesting stories. At least the ones that turned out okay. He still remembered the guy that OD'd in his first week working at the residential rehab clinic.

The place was state funded and pretty much acted as a halfway house for people to get sober. Usually the ones that were drying out, or having problems sticking with that. Now and then, he gathered, those that were worse than assumed. Like Matt who had managed to smuggle something in and then took it, too much or maybe it was just bad shit. Either way, he didn't make it and Jack wasn't going to forget about it in a hurry.

This though, sounded more interesting and a lot less life and death.

"What happened?"

They looked at him and cocked eyebrows, no one in this place particular seemed to like him. But then, they were all there because they had a passion for the work, for helping people. He was there to repay his debt to society. So he kinda got it.

Fred let out a little huff and then Janice explained.

"The new John Doe. Amanda is giving him his meds now, hopefully he'll keep them down. He was sick last night. And... when they found him and brought him in he'd been sick. Or something. There was this black goo. Like tar or something. Had bits of fucking seafood in it."

Fred finally joined in, "Transport crew called him Goo Daddy, looks like someone's hot dad apparently."

Jack raised a brow, "Oh. Interesting. What the hell does a person take to sick up goo?"

"Right?" Fred asked then turned to pick up the three trays stacked on the counter. "Anyway, duty calls."

Jack picked up his own trays and looked at his list. A couple of the residents were ones who had been there a week or two. Quiet but nice enough, usually no trouble, which was nice. The third was a new one. Just the room number, which meant when the breakfast was set up they had no name for them.

In Jack's limited experience that meant they had come in overnight, passed out or otherwise non-verbal. Chances were the person would still be sleeping off whatever was running through their system and Jack would just have to set the tray down and leave it for them.

He made his way down his assigned hall, dropping the first two trays with no drama, everyone was half asleep still. As he continued with his one remaining tray he noticed the nurse leave the room he was heading to and walk the other direction. He considered trying to catch her and ask if they knew anything about the new resident yet, before popping in unprepared, but he didn't fancy shouting up the hallway,

Resolved, Jack knocked gently on the door before letting himself in without waiting for an answer.

For a moment, Jack felt queasy again, and he set the tray down on the desk as a precaution before he even looking at the new resident.

The man sat there on the bed looking drawn and out of sorts. Maybe sick? But he didn't look like a junkie. There was something more to him than that, but in Jack's experience it wasn't drugs. He gave Jack a funny feeling his stomach, something between discomfort and a strange anticipatory thrill. It made his stomach swoop in an unsettling way.

It reminded Jack of the feeling he'd have when getting in over his head. He had done that many times in the past. Whilst being an okay judge of character, he generally had poor judgement, and was happy to go along with the people or things that sent a thrill up his spine. He'd been on the verge of stealing a very expensive car to cover moving to Paris, when he'd

been caught on the lesser charge. Maybe it was that making him wary of something that made him feel a similar thrill, or maybe it was terrifying aura the guy gave off.

"Morning," Jack said before clearing his throat, fearing for a moment he might throw up but pushing it down and trying to act casual.

"Good morning," A deep, rich voice replied in a cold tone as Jack turned to the tray, removing the cover of the breakfast and setting it aside.

Jack wasn't sure of a time when he'd felt more uncomfortable, as though someone had not only walked over his grave, but dug him up and danced on his bones.

"Are you well?" The man asked, his voice raspy from disuse. Jack's jaw clenched, feeling defensive and not really knowing why. He knew he could be a brat but this was something else.

He flexed his jaw a couple of times before letting a forced chuckle bubble through, trying to cover his discomfort with spiteful humour.

"You must be the guy they call Goo Daddy." Jack joked. Even as the man continued to eye him with both confusion and contempt. Something he was more than used to. Jack's chuckle subsided and he let out a little huff at the lack of response. "So, do you have a name? An actual name?"

He couldn't help that his tone was demanding, as though knowing the man's name was going to take away this weird feeling, like he was about to throw up again or pass out. Or both. It felt like there was a hum in the room, electromagnetic interference between them. Something stringing them together that Jack instantly felt the urge to break.

"Cliff," The man replied, as though rolling the word over in his mouth like he was trying to taste if it was correct.

"Cliff? Clifford or something?" Jack asked, trying to draw out some elaboration, disturbed by the fact that the moment he'd heard the word, his dream from the night before had flashed up. Falling over and over, he felt shaky and sick at the thought.

"Just... Cliff," He replied with a pained look, as though a memory had just crept up on him too.

"Okay, Cliff." Jack said, unable to completely suppress the flashing images of the shadowy figure that had been with him on the clifftop. That had fallen with him, Jack realised.

"What is this place?" Cliff asked, and this time there was more confusion than contempt. As the man started to look around him, Jack's jaw tightened, the words drawing him back to the room in the most disorienting way.

He wasn't trained for this sort of thing. He was a volunteer! Worse, he was volunteered by the probation service. This was his penance for car theft, to teach him a lesson and make him give back to society. Mainly it taught him never to end up in one of these places.

"I... think the doctor will be around later. Her rounds are in the afternoon. She should be able to-" Jack started to fob the man off, started to turn away wanting to get out of the room as quickly as he could, but then a strong hand clamped painfully down on his wrist and kept him in place.

Dark, hollow eyes glared at him and he felt like he was being sucked into a void. Into something terrible. But at the same time, the man's hand burned heat into his flesh, as though electricity flowed between them. Jack found the sensation strangely enjoyable, as every hair on his body stood on end.

"You're at the St Mary's Rehabilitation Centre. I don't know why. I don't know what happened to you. The doctor-" Jack spoke quickly, frowning in an attempt to not seem as unsettled as he deeply was by the mixed reaction he had to this man. He stopped when the hand released him, taking the chance to step away, out of the man's reach. Not that he felt much safer.

After a few beats of silence, Cliff said, "I'll wait for the doctor."

Jack nodded, getting the impression that he hadn't understood the man's question at all. Then Jack rushed from the room, racing to the closest bathroom and throwing up. .

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The coming days were strange.

Jack had pretty much settled into a routine with the volunteer work, and now it all felt off. Despite only having seen Cliff once on the first day, when he took in breakfast, he had felt unsettled for the rest of the day. He could practically feel the man in the building. Like a vibration travelling along a thread, a strand, that linked them both.

On the second day, after little sleep and more nightmares, Cliff wasn't on his breakfast rounds, but he was on the lunchtime one. He wondered if he could get out of ever seeing the man again and whether any of the others felt the same foreboding when with him.

But when he took in his lunch, the weird feeling subsided a little. Or maybe it just changed?

Cliff smiled at him gently when he walked in, which again was unexpected.

"I didn't get your name yesterday," Cliff said, a quiet rumble that reminded Jack of one of his old school teachers - a retired military guy. That same ingrained sense of authority that was hard to dismiss.

"It's Jack," Jack replied, putting the tray onto the portable table that was already over the bed.

Cliff looked a little better, a little more colour to his face, but he still seemed unwell. And once again it didn't feel to Jack like drugs. If anything he looked more like one of his neighbours who was fighting cancer. Maybe it was just cancer drugs that had made him sick?

Jack was tempted to pick up the chart at the end of his bed, but knew he'd only understand a fraction of it and be no better off whilst stepping way outside of the bounds of his job.

"Jack," Cliff repeated, and he looked sort of relieved. Like it was something he'd been wanting to ask all day and was glad to know it.

That tug between them was still there, a vibration. And weirdly Jack felt a warmth from it. It was still an uncomfortable and disorienting sensation, but now that Cliff seemed a little better, he felt a little better too. It was fucking weird and Jack didn't want to mention the sensation to anyone. Maybe it was something to do with the bug or whatever had got him sick the last couple of days?

Jack just smiled and went about taking the lid off the food and then collecting the water jug to replace it with fresh.

Cliff didn't touch the food but continued to follow him with his gaze, Jack was incredibly aware.

"I apologise if I made you uncomfortable before, I was hoping for more answers. This place feels very unfamiliar to me," The man said gently and Jack could do no more than nod his acknowledgement and acceptance. "Where are you from, Jack?" Cliff then asked.

Jack couldn't help the little chuckle, "Residents don't usually care about such things." In fact, they were usually too busy trying to cope with withdrawal to give a shit about who brought in their food. At Cliff's continued and expectant look, Jack replied, "L.A., Hawaii and just around the corner."

Cliff nodded and looked thoughtful.

"From here," He confirmed, which puzzled Jack slightly but then Cliff continued before he could question the weird response, "You seem familiar."

"Ah," Jack grinned, "I guess I just have one of those faces."

He expected Cliff to maybe smile or laugh it off, like a normal person. But he continued to look stoic and then finally replied, "Your face is very memorable and not easily confused."

"Thanks, I think." Jack chuckled again, forced this time, unsure what else to say or do. He cleared his throat before continuing, "Look, seems like you're doing better. So if you want some snacks or something later, if you're getting your appetite back, then just ring the buzzer and I'll bring something."

Jack made the offer he usually made to those in recovery, though it wasn't often so soon after their admission.

Cliff looked away for a moment, actually seeming dejected for want of a better word to describe the unexpected expression.

"It isn't food I crave," Cliff spoke in a low tone, looking back to Jack as he pulled his expression back to something less vulnerable. "I... I haven't talked with anyone for a long time. Am I restricted to this room? Is there a communal area in which I can interact with others?"

Jack shook his head, "Policy is no interaction with other residents until your deemed as in recovery. The doctor will check your blood results and progress then go from there."

When Cliff nodded his acceptance, his face all but turning to stone, Jack added. "I could come back if you like? Bring you some books or something, maybe read to you? We're allowed to do that, though a lot of people really hate it if they are still trying to get clean and someone is buzzing around them."

"I would find it acceptable," Cliff replied, turning his focus down to his plate and giving Jack the very firm feeling that he had been dismissed. The weird sensation between them left him all too happy to go.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

They find themselves conjoined

"What I am is the world's luckiest car thief." Jack grinned, Cliff quirked a brow at the confession. "Really, it could have been so much worse."

Jack moved closer, close enough to continue in hushed tones just for Cliff's attention, despite them being alone.

"I'm not just a petty thief. I steal cars to order, expensive ones. And I'm very good at it. I've never been caught for it." Jack chuckled at Cliff's quizzical look. "This? I stupidly managed to miss a stop sign and was pulled over. When they ran my details they found the outstanding warrant for joyriding from when I was seventeen. Not like they could put me in juvie now, so I was charged with evading a warrant and given my good record I was let off with a fine and community service. Hence ending up here."

"And hence being the world's luckiest car thief." Cliff replied, solemn as ever but a hint of amusement there.

"Now you're getting it." Jack grinned.

He had placed the book down a while ago. They had started reading it the day before, some trashy thriller that Jack had dropped by from the small onsite library with the intent of letting Cliff read it. But he wasn't surprised after their conversation the day before, that Cliff asked him to stay and read it to him. Cliff had even cracked a little smile when Jack had agreed, but informed him he wouldn't be doing any of the voices.

That had apparently been acceptable, but they had only gotten a few pages in when Cliff had started asking about the centre, the city and then eventually, about Jack himself.

Jack had pretty much felt it coming, the vibration of it in the invisible strand of connection he felt between them before Cliff even opened his mouth. He could sense the man's curiosity, and had to admit a little of his own in return. Not least what had happened to land him in this place when he clearly wasn't a junkie.

"What do you do?" Jack asked, before adding out of sensitivity to the current situation, and lighten the question, "When you're not chilling in rehab centres."

There was a flicker of several emotions across Cliff's face for just a moment before he looked out the window. His expression was pensive and Jack wondered what was going on with the guy to make him have to think so hard about what seemed a simple question.

Finally Cliff cleared his throat but didn't look back to Jack as he replied.

"I don't recall."

Jack wanted to kick himself for his stupidity. He knew about the man's amnesia but it had been so hard to forget about it when they had become caught up in this getting to know each other, which was all too reminiscent to just chatting someone up in a bar.

"Fuck, I'm sor-" Jack started, but Cliff continued, cutting him off.

"I have flashes, dreams. I'm not sure if they are memories or not. But... Military? And I remember a hospital." Cliff muttered, finally looking back to Jack. "But I also remember guns and... war, tanks. Whales..." He shook his head and looked like it was too painful to recall all the crazy jumbled up images that probably made as little sense to him as they did to Jack. Jack smiled warmly, trying to offer some comfort.

"You seem like a military guy, one of those born and bred warrior types," Jack replied playfully, trying to lighten the mood once more, maybe crossing a line when he added flirtatiously, "I'd take orders from you."

He'd meant it to be perhaps a compliment, trying to let the man know that he wasn't as damaged as maybe he thought he was. And the way Jack did that, without a second thought as to whether the man was okay with it, was to flirt. He steeled himself, going quiet and waiting for what would come next, knowing that one option was to be called and fag and thrown out of the room.

It would be a shame, because he was weirdly starting to like this guy, and the way he felt around him, but better to have that reaction now and not after days of these pleasantries. Especially given that everyone else seemed as freaked out by the guy as Jack had been that first day. Unlike him, they had not come around to Goo Daddy, and wanted as little contact with him as possible.

Jack realised he was holding his breath and let it out slowly, drawing Cliff's attention.

"I appreciate the kind words," Cliff said, no hint one way or another that he had an issue with Jack not being altogether straight. Which was fine.

"Shall I... read more of the book," Jack offered, to break the silence that started to grow between them.

Cliff shook his head and Jack expected that to mean he was being dismissed, finding that he was disappointed at the idea. And not because it meant going back to doing menial tasks and helping with other residents, but because he was genuinely enjoying spending his time with Cliff.

"I want to hear more about you," Cliff said, "I remember nothing of myself, so it's good to hear. Like a connection to reality." He sighed and looked at Jack then, an intense gaze as he continued, "Over the last day I've increasingly felt as though I'm not quite part of reality, and the only thing holding me here is a tenuous thread..."

Jack let out a shuddering breath at the words, sure that Cliff had stopped himself from saying the thread was between the two of them.

So Jack just nodded and swallowed, "I like to cook."

Cliff smiled, a clear encouragement to continue, so Jack did.

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Cliff woke in a cold sweat, his bed soaked beneath him and the feeling of bile in his throat that made him think he was about to vomit. He wondered if he would bring up more of the black sludge that coated his dreams. But the gagging never came and he started to level out his breathing.

The after images of his nightmare sent a chill through him. It was Jack.

The man that he had been getting to know, and even growing fond of, was suffering. He could see multiple paths for him, for them both. In one Jack was shot dead, a blonde woman at his side. In another they fell from the top of a cliff together, and in another Jack was lost to the blackness as he tried to hold together the strand between them.

He felt the sting of tears in his eyes, and knew that he would never be able to recover from Jack's death. He could gladly lose the man that he knew he was connected to in some indescribable way. But he couldn't watch him die. Something inside told him he had seen enough death already.

Cliff took a few panted breaths and calmed himself. Pulling himself from the dream and back together. Rationalising that he couldn't have such a connection with someone he had only known a few days, despite the familiarity of both Jack and the sensation of the connection itself.

He went to his adjoining bathroom and washed his face, glad that he had recovered by the time he returned to sit on the edge of his bed.

It wasn't Jack who came in with breakfast, or any of the other volunteers. It was one of the nurses and Doctor Ito.

She came into the room and smiled at him. There was something in that smile that Cliff recognised. The way a predator recognises emotions in others and predicts responses. She had bad news, which in this situation seemed like something unfathomable. How could any news here be good? He didn't even know who he was, was there much lower to go?

"Cliff," She said softly. They had wanted a surname but he had never given them one, forcing them all onto first name terms. It wasn't something that, at the time, he had consciously done, but it reaped the benefit of putting him in a position of power over them. They had no formality option to separate themselves from their actions with him.

"We ran blood tests twice, in case of contaminants or errors but both have come back the same. You don't have any drugs in your system. Traces of... a few things we don't recognise,

but our lab has not been able to research further as they met a clearance wall. We've never..." She let out a heavy sigh and shook her head. "We've never been in this position before, and I can't say it sits well with any of us, but we have no choice but to turn you over to the Department of Defense.

"Perhaps they will know who you are and... take appropriate action." The nurse suggested, trying to sound positive.

He nodded. He appreciated her kind delivery of the information, but it was all too clear how all but Jack found him uncomfortable to be around. This outcome was possibly better than any of them had hoped. They no longer had responsibility to him.

"We will be contacting them now, and get you ready to travel." There was an apology in her tone, as though she regretted the action, as much as it relieved her all the same.

Cliff merely nodded again.

He had no plans to allow himself to be taken. They were right, they might well know who he was and return him to where he should be, but until he knew those things for himself, he wasn't going to put himself under anyone else's power.

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Jack started his shift at lunchtime, and was a little deflated to find he hadn't been assigned to Cliff. In fact, he'd been feeling low and out of sorts since the morning, and this didn't help.

Despite the fact that often people built rapport with certain residents and would ask to be assigned to them, Jack felt odd about doing the same with Cliff. Partly because everyone found the man so strange that they would wonder what on earth was up with Jack. Partly because Jack knew what was up, and didn't want them to speculate.

He liked Cliff, for no reason he could discern. He enjoyed the man's company, he was calming in a way that Jack had never been around before and it tempered him in a way he'd never imagined he'd like.

But more than that, there was that odd connection he felt. The thread that he imagined between them. The one that, if he were superstitious, he'd say allowed him to feel Cliff in some way. When the man was happy, he was too. And he liked that.

So Jack tried to seem casual as he headed from his assigned rooms back to the kitchens, via the corridor Cliff was on. He didn't need to appear casual going in, because the door was already open. He took a quick glance and saw the room had been stripped, as it was when a resident was moved or discharged.

Despite his thumping heart, the sense of rising panic that he didn't enjoy, Jack tried to seem blasé as he got back to the kitchens and asked Fred, "Where's Goo Daddy?"

"That weird guy? He was sober. I mean... There was clearly something wrong. But his bloods came back completely clean, so they had to discharge him or something? I think the

doctor was going to make some calls to get him set up somewhere else, but he disappeared as soon as he was discharged."

"Oh," Was all Jack could bring himself to say, a strange sense of something like loss stabbed inside him.

"That wasn't it," Sam chimed in, rolling his eyes at Fred as he placed down some boxes of produce he'd been moving.

"He was discharged," Fred countered and then shrugged to say he didn't much care, before picking up his trays and heading out.

Sam went about taking the produce out of the box and putting it in one of the fridges as Jack stood there, trying not to seem expectant.

Jack opened his mouth, about to finally give in and ask, when Sam saw he was still there.

"Oh. Jack, you got on with him, huh? We get odd ones sometimes, not everyone likes to deal with them. I think everyone is pretty grateful you were happy to step up."

Jack nodded, "Yeah, no problem. So... What actually did happen with him? He was discharged?"

Sam continued moving vegetables as he continued, "Kinda? He discharged himself. Word has it from the front desk, that his tests came back fine, but flagged something? I don't know what, but apparently Jess was asked to put in a call to the Homeland Security or something to come and collect him. Serious shit, huh?"

"But he discharged himself?" Jack clarified.

"Yeah, I guess before word got around? Or... I mean, we can't really detain people unless they are a danger to themselves, and only then with a whole bunch of doctor's signatures. So he just left, walked out. No one knows where he went. Hell, we don't even know his name!" Sam shook his head and then chuckled, "Makes you wonder sometimes if some of these people are just from another planet."

"Yeah, crazy," Jack forced the chuckle and tried not to feel the churning of his stomach.

He consoled himself, at the least, that he didn't feel sick or hurt or anything else that might indicate he was sensing that from Cliff. He tried to convince himself to believe in whatever mystical bullshit his mind was trying to tell him was happening, because at that moment it was the only consolation he had.

*

Jack thought increasingly of Cliff as he worked through his shift, wondering where the fuck the man would have gone. He wasn't sure Cliff had been as forthcoming with others as he had been with Jack. Did people know he had nowhere to go? But at least, they knew he had no memories. How could they just let him go?

He tried to ignore the concern that he had. It wasn't like he gave a shit about any of the others who had been discharged in the time he'd been there. But this situation was different, he allowed.

When Jack got home after his shift, he showered and tried to pull himself together. His thoughts still consumed with the fate of the man he'd been getting to know.

He shook his head and scalded himself. Yeah, sure this sucked for Cliff, but really it wasn't anything to do with Jack. Just another example of his habit of falling hard and fast before moving onto the next person. He was just being a fucking idiot letting it all consume him.

It was his inability to stop his mind that drove Jack back out into the street despite the fact that it was now the middle of the night. He wandered, what he considered, aimlessly. Taking in deep breaths of fresh air before realising he was actually going nowhere, just circling his block as though the answer would present itself. He passed the same bodega three times, before stopping to think, to breathe. Realising that he'd been working himself up all the more. He stopped just beyond the shitty alleyway between his building and the next and looked down at the ground. There was a gross dark stain that looked ingrained to the cement of the sidewalk, but he was sure he hadn't noticed it before.

It was black, almost like a void. Like it might suck his soul into it.

Jack's thoughts were drawn away by a scuffling noise and then the sound of harsh raised voices.

He looked down the alley and could just make out in the dim light from the street light behind him, two men scuffling.

"I have nothing," Jack heard a familiar voice and then the sound of a flick knife being opened.

"Hey!" Jack called automatically, starting down the alley as he pulled out his phone. "I'm three seconds from calling the cops." He threatened,

The guy with the knife turned to him, looking determined for a moment before realising it wasn't worth it and taking off down the alley away from him.

As he drew closer Jack saw familiar, determined eyes peering up at him. How long had he been here? The whole time?

"Cliff." Jack couldn't hide his relief at the man being safe and well. And here.

*

If Jack had stopped to think about it, he might have decided that he probably shouldn't take some apparently homeless guy, who had once been a resident where he worked, up to his apartment.

But he didn't stop to think. At least not in those terms. Jack wasn't someone who usually spent a lot of time thinking about others, but he couldn't exactly leave this guy sleeping in the

alleyway next to his block.

Cliff was a little unsteady on his feet, gripping Jack's arm tightly as they went up the stairs.

"Have you eaten? Today?" Jack asked as he unlocked his apartment door.

Cliff shook his head, "The last meal I had you brought me."

Jack winced, that wasn't exactly recent.

"I'll warm up some pasta." Jack offered, receiving only a nod in return as Cliff looked around the small apartment. It was tidy enough, sparse really. One large room containing the living area, kitchen and dining, with three doors off of it leading to a utility room, the bathroom and his bedroom. It was enough for one person.

"I assumed you'd have more luxuries given your success with cars." Cliff rumbled the words and Jack found himself chuckling at them.

"Well, yeah. I save it." He admitted. Under other circumstances he might have taken the moment to impart his dream of moving to France and opening up a restaurant there. But it wasn't the time, so instead he cleared his throat and added, "Besides, this place has a great oven. That was a massive deciding factor for me." Jack grinned, nodding over his shoulder to the cookbooks lining the counter.

Cliff looked at him then, one brow raised as though it wasn't something he'd expected from someone like Jack. Cliff wasn't the first person to give him a look like that.

"It's not like I want to be a car thief my whole life," The words came out more defensively than Jack intended and he sighed before indicating the sofa and starting towards the kitchen.

"I only have one bedroom, I can get you some blankets for the sofa," Jack said as he started to set some pasta on the stove.

Cliff nodded again and stood for a few moments before taking a seat.

When he let out a heavy sigh, Jack frowned and asked, "Are you okay? I mean, of course you're not. Not in general. But, is there something wrong right now?"

"You don't need to do this. I appreciate it." Cliff replied.

Jack left the pasta to cook and moved over to the sofa, hesitating a moment before he sat down next to Cliff.

"I couldn't exactly ignore you." Jack laughed, "That said, I guess you kind of grew on me."

Cliff turned to him with a serious expression and looked as though he was holding something back. But then the sound of water boiling caught Jack's ear and he went back to the kitchen.

There was very little said between them as Cliff ate. Not least because the man was eating and Jack felt unsure about asking questions of someone who had amnesia.

Jack had pulled out some blankets and pillows, making up a bed on the sofa before retiring to his own. It was the early hours of the morning by then and Jack was glad he wasn't working an early shift in the morning.

He tossed and turned and woke more than once, unsure if it was just the strangeness of having someone else in his apartment, or the strangeness of Cliff specifically.

When he woke for the third time, Jack realised that the apartment had become a little cold. It wasn't unusual and usually he just pulled the blanket up from the foot of his bed, but of course it wasn't there. Cliff had it.

That was pretty much all Cliff had.

The thought woke Jack completely and he winced and let out a deep sigh.

He got up from his bed and quietly opened the door into the main living area to peek out.

Cliff was curled under the blanket on the sofa, his eyes tight shut but Jack couldn't tell if he was sleeping or not.

He swallowed and then crept over. He was a few strides away when Cliff's eyes flew open, alert and focused. After clearly taking in Jack's form, he relaxed. Jack felt a pull in his heart at the idea of someone being so on guard. It must have come from his time sleeping rough.

"It's cold," Jack said, until that moment not actually thinking about what possible resolutions there were for that. "You could..."

Cliff blinked.

Jack cleared his throat.

Truth was, Cliff wasn't an unattractive man and Jack wasn't entirely straight. And whilst the offer he was just about to make to share a bed was completely innocent, there was a part of him that had to wonder what Cliff made of it. If the man did turn out to be a damn homophobe and took the offer as something it wasn't intended to be, would he try and beat the shit out of Jack? He'd definitely known worse things to happen and now here he was with a practical stranger in his apartment.

Logically he knew all this, and yet he wasn't scared. He just felt calm and peaceful as he did around Cliff when the man was settled also.

"I'll be fine," Cliff responded to the unasked question and Jack nearly left it at that. He took the lack of hostility in the man's tone to be that he either didn't assume it to be a come on or didn't care if it was.

"Sure, but, uh, it's no bother. I have a king sized bed and you've got my extra blanket. So practical wise, it might be better. But it's totally cool either way, the offer is there, okay?" Jack gave a warm smile and then turned back to his room.

He became aware, as he walked through his door that indeed Cliff was behind him, stripped to undershirt and boxers, carrying the blanket. Jack wordlessly turned, took the blanket and then threw it over the bed, covering the whole thing in the extra layer before getting back under the sheets.

Jack wasn't sure what possessed him, but he got into the otherside than he'd gotten out of, leaving Cliff to get into the prewarmed sheets he had not long vacated.

Perhaps as a response to that Cliff made a sort of rumble noise, but Jack ignored him and they both settled in silence, drifting quickly to sleep.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Will the teacup come back together?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Cliff's dreams were filled with Jack.

It was impossible to forget that the boy slept next to him when he was there, so very real, in the black ooze that tried to suck them both down. Cliff tried to reach for him. They were at the bottom of the cliff they had both gone over, time and again. He could see the strand between them, a physical thing that threaded them together.

But he couldn't reach Jack, and he was being dragged further and further down. Further from Cliff's reach.

It felt like this went on for hours and hours until he was utterly exhausted. And then the view changed, everything spun and Cliff closed his eyes to a blinding light that had come from nowhere. When he opened them again it was to see a teacup falling in slow motion, shattering as it hit the floor. And as it did so there was a blood curdling scream.

Cliff woke, sitting bolt upright and panting. He was covered in a sheen of sweat and had tears in his eyes.

It took him a moment to compose himself before looking over to see if he had disturbed Jack, but the bed was empty. Cliff felt a cold chill run through him at the lack of his companion. A deep sense of dread that something had happened, that his dreams were prophetic, or had perhaps even caused some very real danger to Jack. His heart rate picked up as he imagined Jack really stuck in the black oozing goo that tried to suck him down in his dreams. There was a weird sensation that came with the feeling, an innate knowledge that this was unusual. That it had been quite sometime since he had worried about anyone. But that he had, a long time ago, before the blackness.

The panic, for that was what he realised the feeling to be, subsided as he made out the sound of water running. The clock on his side of the bed told him that it was just after ten, and light was glowing around the closed curtains.

Cliff rose from the bed and followed the sound, leaving the bedroom and coming to the door next to it. It was closed and the sound beyond was perhaps a shower. Cliff hesitated a moment before putting his hand on the door handle and slowly turning it.

The door was unlocked and so he slowly pushed it open, peering inside the room, realising that he needed to see for himself that Jack was alright.

And there he was.

Jack stood naked in the shower, lathering soap over himself.

Cliff swallowed, satisfied that the boy was indeed safe, he allowed himself to look over him. He was trim, in shape but not overly muscular. He had an over abundance of hair under his arms and the length of his legs, but a bare chest. His ass was pert and unexpectedly made Cliff's mouth water.

In fact, the sight of Jack made something catch in Cliff's throat. He wasn't sure the last time he'd ever seen beauty and Jack was certainly that.

He must have gasped louder than he realised, because Jack turned his head quickly to see him at the door.

"Fuck," Jack startled, his hands flying to his crotch, "I forgot anyone else was here. Geez, sorry. I'll um, I'll be out in a minute, then I can grab you some towels." He spoke loudly enough to be heard over the beat of the running water.

"Of course," Cliff replied, backing out of the room and closing the door behind him.

Strangely he found himself both embarrassed and aroused. Sensations he was sure he hadn't experienced in quite some time.

*

Jack had woken in a daze, and whilst he remembered that Cliff was there, he had been too tired to consider what that meant. Like the fact that he should probably lock the bathroom door. He wasn't sure he'd ever used it before, but it might have saved both their embarrassment.

It had just slipped his mind after the lack of sleep. First worrying about Cliff and then, when the man was in his bed, experiencing the strangest dreams. His lungs filling with the black goo that Cliff had thrown up, it surrounding him and trying to drag him down. Cliff trying to reach for him and a teacup smashing.

He had no idea what any of it meant, but it had left him with both a sense of foreboding when it came to Cliff, and a desire to cling to the man for safety. It was entirely fucked up, and Jack didn't like either feeling.

When Jack returned to the bedroom, towel around his waist, he found Cliff there stripped down to his underwear. Jack recognised the boxers as the kind of plain ones that they gave out at the rehab centre to those lacking in possessions.

The thought was sobering. Another reminder that Cliff was an amnesiac homeless guy, and it might not be appropriate for Jack to have him there at all.

And it was difficult to keep that in mind as he looked over the older man. He was in good shape, though had the little podge here and there that came with his age - which Jack had to guess at late 40s, early 50s. His chest sported a rug of greying hair that trailed down his stomach and disappeared into his underwear. Jack, with some effort, stopped his gaze following it all the way down.

"I, uh, have to go to work." Jack stated what was perhaps obvious.

Cliff nodded but there was concern there, not just in his expression but in the vibration Jack felt between them.

"Don't worry, I won't be saying anything to even remotely make them think there is the slightest possibility you are anywhere near here." Jack said, and he felt that it soothed Cliff. He added, "But, I think we need to talk when I get home. About... a lot of things."

Jack didn't want to get into it in that moment, but Cliff closed his eyes and nodded his acceptance, and Jack had to take from that that Cliff knew the sorts of things Jack would want to ask. Not least what the fuck they were both doing.

It wasn't like Jack was the least impetuous person in the world, he'd done a lot of stupid shit in his short life, but this seemed particularly nuts. And what was worse was how much he already like the guy. How he could see something there that he never had with anyone else. He had to just trust his gut, almost literally it seemed, that he would get home and not find the place robbed.

*

It took Cliff a moment to work out how to turn on the shower, something telling him he wasn't quite used to this type of thing, that he was from he was used to them being different. Perhaps that added credence to the idea that he was from a military background.

This seemed all the more possible when he stepped into the stream of water and felt the luxury of it against his skin.

At the centre he'd only had access to a bath, and whilst sinking into the warm water had been pleasant, it wasn't the same as the water spilling over him like warm rain and sloughing the grim of the streets from him.

He watched as the water first ran dark and then, after a few minutes, clear. He stood there for a long while before taking the soap that Jack had used and starting to lather himself up. As he ran his soapy hands over his body and enjoyed the luxurious slide of his fresh feeling skin, he couldn't help but picture Jack.

It was something of a relief that the thought of Jack that sprang to mind was of him in the shower and not all the dark imaginings of his dreams. Or were they memories? It was hard to tell. Memories of things that might happen.

Cliff shuddered at the thoughts he was allowing in, focusing away from the death and pain and back to Jack's soaped up form. He remembered the boy running his hands over himself,

and mirrored the actions whilst also wondering what it would be like to have Jack's hands on him.

His own hand travelled lower as he imagined his hands soaping over Jack's body in turn.

It was a strange sensation, as his hand got there, to realise how hard he was.

He had no memories to bear it out, but he had the strong sense that he hadn't felt an intimate touch in a very long time. And now, he found himself hungry for it.

Cliff grunted as he tunnelled his soapy hand around his cock and began to thrust into it, placing his free hand on the wall for balance and leaning into the stream of water.

He barely moved his hand, seeking his pleasure instead by thrusting his hips forward, into the tightening circle of his fist.

He came quickly and copiously, watching the thick white fluid wash down the drain, and feeling some relief when it wasn't black, as he thought it might be. In fact, he was sure a few days earlier it would have been. Before he came to this place.

Cliff let out a shuddering breath and continued to shower.

Once he was clean and the water was beginning to run cold, he turned the water off and wrapped himself in one of the large towels Jack held left, before returning to the bedroom. The bed was pleasantly rumpled, and that seemed a luxury in and of itself. He wondered when the last time was he'd slept in a proper bed.

As he approached, he could see the grime he had left on his side of the bed and winced. He hadn't realised quite how dirty he had become in the short time since he'd left the centre. He dried himself off and wrapped the towel around his waist and started to rummage in the bedroom cupboards until he found clean sheets.

There was something strangely satisfying about stripping the bed and putting on clean linens. The smell was wonderful, clean and a little like Jack. There was a satisfaction in a job well done, but there was a part of him that wanted to bask in the pleasure this might bring to Jack.

Somewhere, deep inside, it felt like Jack - this strand between them - was pulling out a person long dead. Someone he had been a very long time ago, buried under whatever had come next. And whatever that was, Cliff was sure it was terrible.

He wanted to be the person that Jack was coaxing out of him, the man before the blackness.

*

The day dragged in a way Jack was not accustomed to. Yes there were slow days, there were busy days, and everything in between. But this was different. No matter what was or wasn't happening, nothing interested him. He just wanted to get home. To Cliff.

It felt like the strand between them had strengthened in the night as they lay side by side but was now thinning out, and the sensation made him feel more than a little sick. He considered

asking to go home early as he didn't feel well, but they were already short staffed on the shift and he liked these people. He wasn't going to do that to them, despite his own discomfort. Not least because the staffing issue gave him pause to be sensible. He'd jumped into things quickly before, and had a sense this was going in the same direction, despite the strange circumstances. And for once he wanted to cool it. Not because of those circumstances, but because this felt like more. More than something fleeting and convenient for once. The word commitment flitted uncomfortably into his mind and he shuddered, more as an automatic reaction than anything, finding it didn't sit as badly as usual.

By the time he got home it was late.

The apartment was quiet, the only sign that Cliff had been there was the pile of his books that were out of the bookcase and on his table, one open, as though left at that page when a bookmark couldn't be found.

Jack kept pushing down the anxiety that Cliff might have left, knowing he couldn't have done as his stomach settled and then he felt the strand thickening between them once more.

And yes, there he was, asleep in clean sheets and looking even better than before. His skin was the healthiest colour Jack had seen since meeting him. His hair was loose, almost fluffy, and he was breathing steadily.

Jack was careful not to wake him as he showered again, hating the smell of the kitchens on him, and then pulled on some plaid pyjama pants before crawling into bed.

He was tired, and laying next to Cliff calmed the anxiety that he'd been feeling all day. So it wasn't long before he drifted to sleep.

It was after dawn when he woke again, he could see from the light around the curtains. Bright enough but not time to get up, certainly after having done the later shift.

Jack decided to roll away from the light, only to discover something at his back wouldn't allow it. There was a dead weight behind him and an arm slung around his waist. At some point in the night, whilst he was completely out of it, Cliff had spooned against him.

His body and mind, slowly waking, and his previously barely there morning wood, were all taking an interest.

Realising how much he ached from being trapped in position, Jack tried to stretch a little without disturbing Cliff. It didn't work, he was barely able to move and the motion caused Cliff to stir just enough to press more fully against him and practically curl around him.

Jack couldn't help the almost whimpered moan in response, nor the involuntary push back against Cliff. Not to shrug him off but to get closer, feeling that strand between them pulling tight and zinging with energy.

Jack could barely control his breathing and the temptation to guide Cliff's hand down to his now aching cock, was hard to ignore.

He shuddered when Cliff let out a long breath against his ear, ruffling his hair, before then moving forward and nuzzling into him, now also stirring apparently. It took Jack a moment to realise the man was still actually sleeping.

Jack felt a sudden and deep stab of concern. What if he thought Jack was someone else? What if, whilst sleeping, the amnesiac's mind was recalling loved ones he couldn't remember whilst awake?

Perhaps Cliff felt this anxiety, because as he slept he then breathed against Jack's ear, in a husky low voice. "Jack," Before squirming against him a little and settling with his slightly hard cock against Jack's ass.

Jack did whimper then, but it was clear Cliff was still asleep and none of this was consciously done. Jack wriggled enough to free himself from the hold so that he could turn away from the window as planned, having no choice but to roll back into Cliff's arms and snuggle his head against the man's chest.

Cliff let out a low rumble in his chest, but didn't wake. Jack snuggled back down and went back to sleep.

*

In Cliff's dream he was someone important. Had been. And then there was a change and he wasn't himself anymore. He lost all he was, and had done so again when waking in this strange world.

But he had been someone, even then, who had power.

Someone who saw Jack struggling in the tar, being swallowed up by the black and could decide his fate. He saw multiple strands where he put a finger to his lips, hushed Jack's terrified cries, before advancing on him. Before assisting the blackness in consuming him.

But there was one fate, one course of action that took them in a different direction, pulling Jack from the black and holding him close, sheltering him. Covering him with his own body against an onslaught that it took time to realise was sharp shards of porcelain falling all around them.

"I've got you. You're safe," He muttered into Jack's hair .

And then there was a bright flash.

Cliff remembered then.

He remembered standing there, blinded by a flash of light and feeling a sickening pull within him. A strand he hadn't realised was there.

He remembered losing consciousness, his mind swamped with images. A purple sky, a man that looked like him - lots of men that looked like him. And one had crackling purple eyes, glowing with an unnatural energy. He held out his hand and shards of china rose in front of him. It was as though Cliff stood watching the man as the china floated up between them and

then coalesced into a perfect little teacup. Another man took hold of the cup, and then there were infinite copies of him too - all the same but a little different. The first man clicked his fingers and everything went black.

The other man was Jack.

And then there was darkness and he was waking in the centre.

Cliff remembered everything.

He was dead. Had been dead.

He had died and only his love for his son had kept him from moving on, from true death. He had remained in that limbo on the beach before finally being able to see him again and help him understand his place in the world. And that should have been it. Cliff should have died then, should have left the beach that was the corridor between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

Instead there had been the blinding light and the purple sky above the cliff and he had been pulled back into the world of the living, connected to a living person. To Jack. To a different spacetime that was beyond the stranding.

He had thought his fate was to finally, truly die. But it would seem his true fate was to be with Jack. And those two realities were at odds.

He felt the anguish of renewed loss and terror and every painful and joyful emotion he'd ever experienced before he had awoken in the centre. He knew who he was. Who he had been. The pain that came with that. But the peace too, now that he had made his peace with his son.

The memories hit him harder than any force ever could. If he'd have been standing it would have knocked him from his feet.

Instead it merely knocked him from sleeping into wakefulness, a silent scream lodged in his throat.

He knew who he was and the thought terrified him. What he'd been capable of, even if for love and vengeance. And moreover, terrified that death would claim him now, as it should have done before.

Before reality had opened up and pulled he and Jack together. Just as it had pulled multiple versions of them through time and reality. The many versions of his own timeline kept playing out, the realities that might have happened if Jack had been deposited in his time rather than the other way around.

A shudder went through him at the thought. The many ways Jack would have died, perhaps both of them.

He would have to tell Jack everything he supposed. Who he was. No, who he had been. He wasn't that man anymore. He wasn't even in that place anymore. And how could he go back

now that he and Jack had found each other? Something apparently fated for them. Someone Cliff needed, after everything. The love and the pain and the terror. Now he had Jack.

Cliff was panting, just starting to recover from the reality that had been dumped upon him as he lay there in the dark.

It took a moment for the ringing in his ears to stop, and then he realised Jack was whimpering. Writhing and struggling in the bedsheets.

"Jack," Cliff said, voice hoarse and barely audible as he rolled on his side to try and wake the boy. But Jack continued to writhe and then cried out, his eyes springing open as he started to scream and scream.

"Jack," Cliff moved bodily over him, pressing himself to Jack as he had in his dream. "I've got you, you're safe. You're safe."

Jack woke by increments, sobbing until he was crying against Cliff's chest.

"Don't leave me," Jack practically wailed, and every instinct told Cliff they had shared those dreams. "I've never wanted... needed. But I need you." Jack shook as he spoke. "You make me a better person and I... Don't leave, don't go back there..."

"I won't, I won't," He promised, kissing the words into Jack's hair as he rolled them to their sides and lay face to face, slotted as much against each other as possible.

Jack looked at him with red rimmed eyes, and Cliff saw everything reflected there - the horror of the reality they had both avoided. And he knew, Cliff was sure, everything about Cliff. He had seen that too, who he was and that he remembered. He had seen his own death over and over in both realities, and more.

"We... We came back together..." Jack said, quietly. And for a moment Cliff thought he was going to cry again, but instead he surged forward and pressed his mouth to Cliff's.

Cliff took in a sharp breath at the unexpected kiss. That surprise lasted only a moment, before he slipped his hand around the back of Jack's neck and up into the short curls at his nape, stroking gently there in counterpoint to how hungrily they were kissing.

"Cliff..." Jack muttered his name, breathed it reverently as he pushed Cliff to his back and quickly straddled him.

"I won't leave you, I won't go back." Cliff reassured again, answering the unasked question.

Jack nodded before lowering himself into another passionate kiss, moving slowly over Cliff. Jack pressed his crotch down just enough to meet Cliff's as he rocked over him, bringing them both to full hardness.

"Are you... Do you even like men?" Jack laughed the words against Cliff's lips, an edge of hysteria there now that sprang from this energy and relief that they needed to release between them.

"I... Like you. I want you," Cliff growled the words and slid his hands up Jack's thighs and to his ass.

He meant it. He couldn't even begin to recall the life before, he didn't want to. There was so much pain there when it came to love. And did it matter? He wanted Jack, wanted to pleasure him and use him for his own pleasure in return. He wanted to feel their bodies come together completely, not just the strand between them, but conjoined completely. Body and soul in a passionate consummation of what was fated.

Panting, Jack pulled back and looked down at him, seeming pained as he started to speak.

"I dreamt about you. I've... been dreaming about you. About a clifftop and blackness. And being gunned down... With a woman as I... I was in Paris... I wasn't. I've never been. I was meant to go before I got arrested. If I hadn't been arrested I'd have been in Paris, I'd never have met you... I'd have..." Jack trailed off.

"I believe we are connected," Cliff muttered the words with conviction. "You and I."

Jack frowned and looked as though he might try and refute it. But Cliff could feel him, his emotions vibrating between them. Jack hadn't been close to anyone for a long time either, it was unspoken. He'd never committed to the flings he'd had, always ready to move on to someone else, and that was at an end now. Cliff could feel it, along with the relief in him. In them both.

*

Jack trembled.

Their passion tempered, Cliff rolled them until Jack was under him and he lovingly nuzzled at his neck until Jack's toes were curling and his eyes were rolling in pleasure. All the more so as Cliff rutted their hard lengths together, finding friction despite their clothes.

Jack was an attentive lover, something that had always served him well. He had never had someone pay the same attention to him, and it was almost too much to bear.

"Stop... Stop... I'm going to come." Jack pushed Cliff off and panted for breath. He couldn't help but return the grin that Cliff flashed down at him. "What can I say? I like you Goo Daddy."

A dark look passed over Cliff's face and Jack wondered if referencing the black substance that haunted their dreams, had been a mistake. Cliff shuddered as though shaking it off, something made clear through the strand, and then he moved down and slowly pulled off Jack's clothes with hungry determination.

Jack arched and moaned as Cliff sank his mouth down onto his leaking cock, taking him deep and sucking hard before pulling back and swirling his tongue around his glans. One thing was for sure, Cliff had definitely done this before.

"Fuck," Jack moaned, arching off the bed and gripping the sheets in tight fingers. He let Cliff continue, what he could only call, the worship of his cock, until he thought he was going to break apart. He really wasn't going to last long. He had never realised quite how over sensitive he could be, and this strand between them, shooting pleasure between them in an endless loop of desire, was only making everything more intense.

"Wait... wait... Want..." Jack panted and pushed Cliff's shoulders until he backed off, letting Jack's cock drop from his mouth and smack wetly to his belly.

Jack shuffled to the edge of the bed, keeping Cliff between his legs as he rummaged in his drawer and brought out a box of condoms and a tube of lube.

Cliff let out a shaky breath and nodded.

He grabbed the lube and settled between Jack's legs again, nuzzling at his cock gently, as he lubed his fingers and started rubbing them over Jack's hole.

Jack groaned and relaxed into the sensation. He had to admit he loved anal, even with girls he was happy to get pegged. With so many sensitive nerve endings around his rim and a prostate inside, what wasn't to love?

Jack went lax and moaned as Cliff started to push a finger inside him. Then quickly a second one once he realised how welcoming Jack's body was. He hadn't done this in a few week, and that was with a toy. But the pleasure he took in it always relaxed him enough to give easily. As Cliff discovered, with a grunt of his own pleasure in response.

"Fuck me..." Jack begged, writhing and biting at his bottom lip.

*Let's draw a line in the sand
Keep it straight and narrow*

Cliff pulled back, panting, and Jack wondered if he was close to coming himself. He let out a chuckle, they were no better than teenagers in their desperate want.

But then the man shuddered and let out a sharp cry of anguish. The air around him flickered, almost pixelating.

When Cliff opened his eyes again they were almost entirely black. Before Jack had chance to react to this, he felt Cliff pressing inside him again and groaned.

He was sure he should be concerned, but the thread between them gave him no reason for concern, and the pleasure was so good as Cliff thrust deep despite the way his whole body seemed to be flickering.

"Oh god..." Jack moaned, nearly convulsing with his approaching orgasm as Cliff pounded into him. The hard, rough fucking they both seemed to need in that moment. Cliff clung to him and he felt the sharp press of the man's fingers coming and going intermittently as he seemed to phase in and out of reality.

He knew he should question it, that this was bad. Something was happening. But whatever it was didn't feel important in that moment. There was only Cliff.

*We had it all in our hands
We begged and then we borrowed
What will become of us all at the end of love?*

"Ughh" Cliff let out a strangled cry. He pulled out just as Jack came, hard.

The white release spattering his stomach. And then Cliff spilled onto his belly too, black ooze drooling from his slit.

At the sight of it, Jack startled. Immediately taken back to his nightmares. He could feel the same rising anxiety through the strand as Cliff shook.

Almost imperceptibly at first, and then increasing in intensity, the world around them seemed to crack. There was an intermittent blinding light and then darkness, and then the room again. The darkness became clearer and Jack felt it around him. He was in the blackness, the thick fluid coming up around him, submerging his room.

*You can take my heart
And hold it together as we fall apart
Maybe together we can make our mark in the stars we embark
And keep us together as the lights go dark*

"No..." Cliff let out a strangled growl and took hold of Jack, pulling him up to where he now knelt, the black following him and not letting go as he tried to pull them both above it.

There was a sound all around them, as though there was a record stuck, repeating over and over the sound of a teacup smashing.

"What's happening?" Jack asked, terrified as he clung to Cliff.

The corner of the room had disappeared and was now entirely a window into that other world.

They were on a beach at the base of a cliff, but instead of sea there was only blackness. And on the cliff stood two men embracing, and then falling. And then embracing and falling. Over and over, as though stuck in a loop. Stuck in a glitch in that reality.

"My time is trying to pull us back in... Trying to take me back, I don't belong here." Cliff surmised, clutching to Jack all the more. Jack could feel the strain in his arms as the black tried to take him.

And then it took hold of Cliff and starts dragging him down. It is able to do this faster, easier, despite Cliff resisting and Jack now in the position of trying to pull him back.

*Now that it's all said and done
Nothing really matters
What will become of us all if we dare to dream?*

"Cliff," Jack let out a shocked gasp as he was released. Unwanted by the blackness. Jack was able to scramble backwards, trying to pull Cliff with him, back onto the normal part of the bed as it rose like a ship on the verge of sinking.

They saw it then, as they slipped from each other. The strand between them. It pulsed with energy, visible and tangible.

Jack gripped hold of it and it crackled in his hands. He expected it to burn as it vibrated between them, but it didn't. He pulled, trying to bring Cliff with him but Cliff was only pulled deeper into the black, the strand growing longer and thinner between them, almost just a wisp.

Cliff let out another anguished cry as he took it in his own hands and tried to pull himself out, towards the naked and black covered lover he knew he needed to stay with. Jack could feel that through the connection, all the stronger now. They needed to stay together, it was fate.

At the end of the scene?

You can take my heart

Hold it together as we fall apart

"The teacup didn't come back together," Cliff growled, making one last attempt to pull himself out, but sinking lower and shaking his head. "It won't let me go. I need you to... be safe..." Cliff growled and took the strand into a strong grip and tugging it again. This time from himself, trying to sever the connection. "Go, Jack!"

"No!" Jack screamed. He knew immediately what he had to do, Because there was nothing else he could do.

Jack surged forward, shortening the strand until he was back in the black, back in Cliff's arms.

"No," Cliff lamented with a groan of despair. "I wanted you to be safe. It's all I've ever wanted for you."

"For both of us," Jack choked and kissed the man, holding tight to him as he let himself fall. He had found someone he never wanted to be parted from. In life or in death.

Dragging Cliff with him as he gave himself up, as he tumbled them into the black.

They fell.

*

Cliff woke with a start.

He was naked in soft sheets. Too soft to be the hospital chair he'd spent so many nights in watching his son grow.

He blinked his eyes open and the ceiling wasn't his either. The room was too light and warm. Was he still with...

"Jack!" Cliff croaked, his throat raw.

There was a gentle hand on him as he tried to sit, pushing him back to the bed and then Jack was there snuggling against his side.

"I'm here," Jack told him, a note of relief there as though he hadn't been sure they would make it either. But he was there. They both were, holding each other for dear life as they had been before in the black.

Whenever, wherever that was.

"You...You've brought me back to who I used to be, a long time ago. Before a lot of loss and pain. I used to be a good man." Cliff muttered the words, soft. It would take some explaining and, no doubt, there would come a time when he would do that. But for now he was beyond processing the last few days, beyond knowing he was free, and that he was with Jack. A man who, strangely was not a stranger to him, who fate had brought him to. Brought them to each other when the alternative was their eternal death, it would seem.

It was too much to really think about. Easier just to accept it for the good fortune that it was and not question it.

Familiar words swam in his mind.

*What will become of us now, at the end of time?
We'll be fine, you and I*

Repeating over and over and feeling nothing of that other place. Not even the strand between them had survived. Not that they needed it, not here. Nothing of that place remained within him. He truly was free.

"We'll be fine, you and I." Cliff pressed the words against Jack's temple before pulling him closer, as close as the strand had pulled them.

Definitely no need for it now, Cliff sighed contently as Jack held him tight.

*You can take my heart
Hold it together as we fall apart
Maybe together we can make our mark in the stars we embark
And keep us together as the lights go dark*

Chapter End Notes

Song lyrics from [CHVRCHES - Death Stranding](#)

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